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WAGNER, MINNA AND COSIMA.

BY GUSTAV KOBBE, AUTHOR OF "WAGNER'S LIFE AND WORKS," ETC.

WAGNER, Minna and Cosima; and—poor Minna! Thrown into the shade by the bright luminary that succeeded you, how many are there who realize that for nearly a quarter of a century you tried to smooth the pathway of one of the greatest and most contrary geniuses that ever lived, sharing exile, poverty and privation; slaving for him uncomplainingly; striving to create little oases of cheer in the desert of despondency; only to die unhonored and unsung and, I am tempted to add, almost unpitied?

"She was a good wife, but she did not appreciate his genius." That disposes of Minna—pretty Wilhelmine Planer, the Magdeburg actress who gave up her stage career to become Wagner's wife; who loved him and drudged for him, wearing away her youth and her beauty; and who, when after years of poverty he had become a *protégé* of a king and the favored of fortune, died separated from him, another woman having taken her place.

Yet what a wonderful part in his life that other woman played. She seems to have entered it under a decree of fate. Her father, Franz Liszt, had made championship of Wagner's art, when Wagner was still quite unknown, an almost sacred mission; and the objective point of her wedding trip with her first husband, Hans von Bülow, was Wagner's house in Zurich. Had they never met, two souls would have lived on, yearning for the unknown. But they met; and the rest is history.

When I was in Bayreuth at the production of "Parsifal" in 1882, this woman moved through the bustle and excitement attending the festival like a queen. A glance sufficed to show that she was Liszt's daughter. She was his image. Often I looked at her and thought of her remarkable career—the daughter of a great musician and of a beautiful, aristocratic and accomplished French-

woman; the wife, first of a great pianist and then of the greatest musical genius the world has known, helping him to his triumph and sharing it. For those who are in a position to know say that without her tact Bayreuth would have remained an unfulfilled dream. That, since Wagner's death, Frau Cosima has been Bayreuth is a self-evident proposition.

But, though grateful to the kind fate that led Cosima to cross Wagner's path, one cannot help pitying the woman whose sad destiny it was to share only his unsuccessful years. There is ample evidence of how well she fulfilled her duties *up to* the point of following his genius in its daring flights, but, alas for her, not *beyond*.

It was in November, 1836, that Wagner married Fräulein Wilhelmina Planer, the leading actress of the Magdeburg company. Her father was a spindle maker. It is said that her desire to earn money for the household, rather than the impetus of a well-defined histrionic gift, led her to go on the stage; but, once on the stage, she discovered that she had unquestionable talent, and played leading characters in tragedy and comedy with success.

Minna is described as handsome, but not strikingly so; of medium height and slim figure, with "soft, gazelle-like eyes which were a faithful index of a tender heart." She was quiet in speech and movement, yet quick to anticipate any wish, almost complying with it before it was expressed. Her nature was the very opposite of Wagner's. Where he was passionate, strong-willed and ambitious, she was gentle, affectionate and retiring. Where he yearned for conquest, she wanted only a well-regulated home. But she could not follow him in his art theories, and as his genius assumed more definite shape she became less and less able to comprehend it. It was almost a sealed book to her.

Doubtless, the ill success of "The Flying Dutchman" and "Tannhäuser," works which, after "Rienzi," puzzled people, engendered her first misunderstanding of Wagner's genius. Some may be surprised that this lack of appreciation did not bring about a separation sooner, instead of after nearly a quarter of a century of married life. But when a man is struggling with poverty, the woman who unobtrusively aids him in bearing it is regarded by him as an angel of light, and the question as to whether she appreciates his genius or not becomes a secondary one in the struggle for existence.

But when at last success comes, as it did in Wagner's case,

when there is time for companionship, there is also opportunity for an estimate of intellectual quality. Then it is that the man of genius discovers that the woman who has stood by him through his poverty lacks the graces of mind necessary to his complete happiness, and the self-sacrificing wife who has been his drudge, in order that he might the better meet want, and who has perhaps lost her youth and her looks in his service, is forgotten for some one else. The worst of it is that the world forgets her and all she has done for the great man in her quiet, uncomplaining way. The drudge never finds a page in the "Loves of the Poets." The woman who comes in and reaps where the other has sown, does.

During a hard struggle which lasted many years, Minna's homely love was all Wagner's; and this in spite of the fact that, although Wagner appreciated her and even loved her, he loved his art better, making—fortunately for the world, perhaps—sacrifices for it which kept him in a continual state of semi-poverty. The real secret of the unhappy lives often led by wives of men of genius is this: The wife of a genius must always admit a rival—her husband's art. The struggles, the poverty, which result from his devotion to it, she must be prepared to bear without a murmur. She must be ready, when they need bread, to see him deliberately turn his back on the means of securing it, because those means are unworthy of his genius. No woman should enter marriage with her eyes as wide open as she who becomes the wife of a man of genius. Yet how few women, wedding such men, know what is before them; and how many are there who are not doomed to disillusion?

Wagner's friend, Ferdinand Praeger, has much to say of Minna's fine qualities. But he also tells several anecdotes which completely illustrate how absolutely she failed to comprehend Wagner's genius and ambition. Praeger visited them in their "trimly kept Swiss chalet" in Zurich in the summer of 1856. One day when Praeger and Minna were seated at the luncheon table waiting for Wagner, who was scoring the "*Nibelung*," to come down from his study, she asked: "Now, honestly, is Richard really such a great genius?" Remember that this question was asked about the composer of "*Rienzi*," "*Flying Dutchman*," "*Tannhäuser*" and "*Lohengrin*." If she was unable to discover his genius in these, how could she be expected to follow its loftier flights in his later works?

On another occasion, when Wagner was complaining that the public did not understand him, she said: "Well, Richard, why don't you write something for the gallery?" So little did she understand the man whose genius was founded upon unswerving devotion to artistic truth, and who would sooner have gone to the grave unknown than have dishonored himself by catering to the public.

During Praeger's visit, an old Magdeburg singer and her two daughters called on Wagner. They sang the music of the Rhine-daughters from "Rheingold." When they finished singing, Minna asked Praeger: "Is it really as beautiful as you say? It does not seem so to me, and I'm afraid it would not sound so to others."

Wagner was not slow to discover her inability to understand him, but "her good qualities and domestic virtues" greatly endeared her to him. Her economy in itself was most invaluable, as a brake on such thoughtless extravagance as Wagner was apt to indulge in if left to himself. There are numerous examples of her devotion to him.

During their sojourn in Paris, from 1839 to 1842, they often had to face actual want. At these crises, Minna always tried to help her husband to the best of her ability. Once, when it seemed utterly impossible to him to procure even the amount necessary for their daily food, he suggested to Minna to pawn her few trinkets. Only then did he learn that she had already done so, and that, in fact, they had been living for some time on the proceeds. While making such sacrifices she did everything she could to curtail the expenses, hiding from her husband as much of the discomfort of their poor home as possible. She cleaned house, stood at the wash-tub, did the mending and cooking, willingly and cheerfully. She was a little heroine, and well might Wagner in after years speak of her sacrifices at this time, as he is said to have done, with tears in his eyes.

Wagner was always sensitive regarding his personal appearance; and during these years of poverty in Paris his wardrobe had become sadly in need of replenishing. Yet money wherewith to do this was lacking. Before his birthday came around in May, 1840, Minna, in order to give him special pleasure on that day, hunted through Paris until she found a small German tailor who, moved by her persuasiveness, made a suit of clothes in time for Wagner's birthday, agreeing to wait for payment until a more

favorable opportunity. To Wagner's credit be it said that, however much in later years her lack of appreciation for his genius may have estranged him from her, he never, even after their separation, hesitated to acknowledge her devotion to him during the most trying periods of his life.

There is another pretty birthday episode which shows Minna's forethought for her husband. Wagner was in London, filling his engagement with the Philharmonic, on his birthday in 1855. We have seen with what touching devotion, fifteen years earlier, Minna had managed in the midst of their poverty in Paris to procure for him a new suit of clothes for a birthday present. During his London engagement she remained in Zurich; but she timed her birthday letter so carefully that he received it on the very morning; and in it she apprised him that she had despatched a birthday present for him—a dressing gown of violet velvet, lined with satin of the same color, and a biretta to match. Wagner was delighted, the gift being just after his own heart. Minna also knew her husband's fondness for animals, and her birthday letter gave him information about Peps, the dog, and about the parrot which had been taught to repeat, "*Richard Wagner, du bist ein grosser mann!*" If poor Minna herself could not appreciate her husband's genius, she was at least determined that some member of the household should appear to.

July saw Wagner back in Zurich again, and although it was May, only two months before, that Minna had presented him with a new dressing gown, she had another waiting for him when he reached home. Moreover, she had made for him what Wagner in a letter to Praeger describes as "wonderfully fine silk trousers for home wear, so that all the work I do is to loll about in this costume first on one sofa and then on another."

There is no doubt that during a long period of their married life Wagner fully appreciated Minna's homely virtues, and that her devotion deeply touched him. He was attentive to her in many ways, and he appears to have done all he could to make her happy—except that he would not swerve from his artistic ideals to provide the individual comforts of life. A heart trouble, from which she suffered, caused him great anxiety. "Her ever-increasing ill health makes me very sad," he wrote to Praeger in September, 1855. "Worried and troubled, I resume work. I struggle at it, as work is the only power that brings to me oblivion."

As illustrating the pleasant relations which existed between Wagner and his wife in 1856, Praeger relates that, during his visit, if Minna was not about at the early rising hour, Wagner would go to the piano and play first softly, then with curious harmonies, "full orchestral effects as it were, 'Get up, get up, thou Merry Swiss Boy.'"

But as Minna's heart trouble increased, she began to fret over their uncertain material condition. The fact is that she had been tried beyond her strength, and, not sharing her husband's enormous confidence in his artistic powers, she had not the stimulus of faith in his ultimate success to sustain her. Wagner himself once summed up her side of the case when he exclaimed: "Poor woman, who was called upon to get along with a monster of a genius!" Her irritability resulting from her illness was accentuated by jealousy of several of the women who, as Wagner's genius became better known, entered the growing circle of his ardent admirers.

And so the last years of their married life were stormy, until the crisis came in 1861, when they separated, Minna retiring to Dresden, where she died in 1866. Wagner contributed to her support and always acknowledged the debt of gratitude he owed her, but—"my inspiration carried me into a sphere she could not follow, and the exuberance of my heated enthusiasm was met with a cold douche." Nevertheless he expressed the belief that everything might have been arranged between them. "It would have been better had it been so. Now there is a dark void, and my misery is deep." This was just before the message from the King of Bavaria, which formed the turning point in his career, reached him. But even after he was installed in luxury, he had "no one to realize and enjoy with me this limitless comfort."

An incidental tribute to Minna's worth came from a wholly unexpected source twenty years after her death, and several years after Wagner's, when there were published the memoirs of Count von Beust, Saxon Prime Minister, who was in office when Wagner was banished from Saxony for taking part in the revolution of 1849. Many years later, when Wagner had been pardoned, he called on von Beust, who in his memoirs gives a highly interesting account of the interview. The Prime Minister had known Minna, and, although the interview in no way referred to her, he goes out of his way to speak of her as "an excellent woman."

In a letter written by Wagner in June, 1864, there occurs this significant sentence: "There is one good being who brightens my household." The "good being" was Cosima Liszt von Bülow, who, from now on, was destined to fill his life with the sunshine of love and of devotion to his art.

"Since I last saw you in Munich," writes Wagner to a friend, "I have not again left my asylum, which, in the meanwhile, has also become the refuge of her who was destined to prove that I could well be helped, and that the axiom of my many friends, that I 'could not be helped,' was false! She knew that I could be helped, and has helped me: she has defied every disapprobation and taken upon herself every condemnation."

This was written in June, 1870, a year after the birth of their son, Siegfried. In August, 1870, the following announcement was sent out:

"We have the honor to announce our marriage, which took place on the 25th of August of this year in the Protestant Church in Lucerne.

Richard Wagner.

Cosima Wagner, *née* Liszt."

August 25, 1870.

In the following November Wagner wrote to Praeger: "Often do I think of you because of your love for children. My house, too, is full of children, the children of my wife. [These were the daughters of von Bülow.] But, besides, there blooms for me a splendid son, strong and beautiful, whom I dare call Siegfried Richard Wagner. Now think what I must feel that this at last has fallen to my share. I am fifty-seven years old." There is a volume of pathos in that last sentence. He had waited so long for the joy which at last was his.

This extraordinary woman, who brought Wagner so much happiness and as to whom it may be said that none ever played so important a part in the history of music, came to her many graces and accomplishments by right of birth. She was the daughter of Liszt and the Countess d'Agoult, a French author, better known under her pen name of "Daniel Stern."

The Countess's father, Viscount Flavigny, was an old Royalist nobleman. While an *émigré* during the Revolution, he had married the beautiful daughter of the Frankfort banker, Bethman. After the Flavignys returned to France, their daughter, an extremely beautiful blonde, was brought up partly at the Flavigny château, partly at the Sacré Cœur de Marie, in Paris. Talented beyond her years, her wit and beauty won her much admiration.

At an early age she married Count Charles d'Agoult, a French officer, a member of the old aristocracy and twenty years her senior.

When she first met Liszt she was twenty-nine years old, had been married six years and was the mother of three children. She was still beautiful, and in her salon she gathered around her men and women of rank, *esprit* and fame. In 1835 Liszt left Paris after the concert season there. The Countess followed him, and the next heard of them they were in Switzerland. They remained together six years, Cosima, born in 1837, being one of the three children resulting from the union. In the Countess's relations with Liszt there appears to have been a curious mingling of *la grande passion* and hauteur. For when, soon after she had joined him in Switzerland, he urged her to secure a divorce in order that they might marry, she drew herself up and replied: "*Madame la Comtesse d'Agoult ne sera jamais Madame Liszt!*" Certainly none but a French woman would have been capable of such a reply under the same circumstances. Equally French was her husband's remark when, the Countess's support having been assumed by Liszt, he expressed the opinion that throughout the whole affair the pianist had behaved like a man of honor.

After the separation of Liszt and Countess d'Agoult, he entrusted the care of the three children to his mother. During a brief sojourn in Paris, Wagner met Cosima, then a girl of sixteen, for the first time. She formed with Liszt, von Bülow, Berlioz and a few others the very small, but extremely select, audience which, at the house of Liszt's mother, heard Wagner read from the last of his "Nibelung" dramas. In 1855, the burden of the care of the children falling too heavily upon Liszt's mother, the duty of looking after the daughters was cheerfully undertaken by the mother of Hans von Bülow, who resided in Berlin. The girls were highly talented.

In a letter written by von Bülow in June, 1856, he speaks of them in these interesting terms: "These wonderful girls bear their name with right—full of talent, cleverness and life, they are interesting personalities, such as I have rarely met. Another than I would be happy in their companionship. But their evident superiority annoys me, and the impossibility to appear sufficiently interesting to them prevents my appreciating the pleasure of their society as much as I would like to—there you have a confession,

the candor of which you will not deny. It is not very flattering for a young man, but it is absolutely true." Yet, a year later, he married one of these girls whose "superiority" so annoyed him.

Was it fate which led the von Bülowes on their wedding trip to Wagner? For, from a letter to his friend, Richard Pohl, which von Bülow wrote the day before his wedding to Cosima Liszt, the "Wagnerstadt," Zurich, is mentioned as the aim of their journey.

They arrived at Zurich early in September. "For the last fortnight," writes von Bülow, under date of September 19, 1857, "I and my wife have been living in Wagner's house, and I do not know anything else that could have afforded me such benefit, such refreshment as being together with this wonderful, unique man, whom one should worship as a god."

On his side Wagner was charmed with the von Bülowes. In one of his letters he speaks of their visit as his most delightful experience of the summer. "They spent three weeks in our little house; I have rarely been so pleasantly and delightfully affected as by their informal visit. In the mornings they had to keep quiet, for I was writing my 'Tristan,' of which I read them an act aloud every week. If you knew Cosima, you would agree with me when I conclude that this young pair is wonderfully well mated. With all their great intelligence and real artistic sympathy, there is something so light and buoyant in the two young people that one was obliged to feel perfectly at home with them."

Wagner allowed them to depart only under promise that they would return next year, which they did, to find a household on the verge of disruption and to be unwilling witnesses to some of the closing scenes of Wagner's first marriage.

When the von Bülowes came to visit him again, after he had separated from his wife and was living in Biebrich, opposite Mayence, engaged in the composition of "Die Meistersinger," he was not so favorably impressed with their marriage. In a letter, after speaking of von Bülow's depression owing to poor health, he writes: "Add to this a tragic marriage; a young woman of extraordinary, quite unprecedented, endowment, Liszt's wonderful image, but of superior intellect."

That this woman, who so impressed Wagner, was in her turn filled with admiration for his gifts, appears from two letters which she wrote from Biebrich to her father. In one of these she speaks enthusiastically of some of the "Tristan" music, which she had

heard Wagner rehearsing with the tenor Schnorr and the latter's wife. The other letter concerns "Die Meistersinger":

"The 'Meistersinger' are to Wagner's other conceptions what the 'Winter's Tale' is to Shakespeare's other works. Its fantasy is found in gayety and drollery, and it has called up the Nuremberg of the Middle Ages with its guilds, its poet-artisans, its pedants, its cavaliers, to draw forth the freshest laughter in the midst of the highest, the most ideal poetry." It is evident that two such artistically sympathetic souls could not long remain in each other's proximity without craving a closer union.

The history of art has no more beautiful union between kindred souls to chronicle than this. One who had ample opportunity to observe their everyday life says that Wagner adored Cosima and that she worshipped him. "All his wishes were anticipated with an ingenuity known only to the unselfish love of woman. To her he could impart all his plans, talk over his projects, knowing that they would be appreciated."

Since death, early in 1883, sundered this happy union, she has devoted herself to the continuance of the Bayreuth festival plays. Her grief when Wagner died was profound, and one act of hers over his coffin was as beautiful and touching as it was, I believe, unique. She cut off her long hair, which her husband had loved to have her wear loose over her shoulder, and placed it under his head as a cushion to be buried with him.

No one who realizes what Wagner is in the world of music can fail in a sense of gratitude to Cosima for the happiness with which she surrounded him during the latter part of his life. Yet, through it all, it is impossible not to see at times the tragic figure of the woman to whom pitiless fate assigned the lot of being his companion in those long, dark years of ill success. And so, when we speak of Wagner, Minna and Cosima, we involuntarily add, "Poor Minna!"

GUSTAV KOBBE.